

## Editorial

**Working with stress: can we turn distress into eustress?****Brulé G, Morgan R**

Erasmus University Rotterdam, Happiness Research Nexus, the Netherlands

**Received** February 19, 2018; **Accepted** February 26, 2018 **Published** February 28, 2018**Copyright:** © 2018 Brulé G et al.

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**\*Corresponding author:** Brulé G, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Happiness Research Nexus Netherlands Email: - [gael.brule@gmail.com](mailto:gael.brule@gmail.com)

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**Description**

Stress is something we all experience. While this statement may seem obvious given the antidotal evidence from our personal lives and conversations with others, it is also supported by findings from surveys where people are asked about how they feel about stress. In America, the stress levels are consistently higher than what people deem is a “healthy level of stress,” and in 2015 78% of the population reported that they experienced a symptom of stress [1]. It probably also will not come as a surprise that stress is often related to the workplace and is associated with professional circumstances, deadlines, financially-related issues, etc. According to Fink [2], “numerous studies show that job stress is by far the major source of stress for American adults and that it has escalated progressively over the past few decades.” The APA Stress in America report comes to a similar conclusion: “stress is a part of our lives and stems from the workplace: The workplace is where we spend most of our time, and it is also the second most common reported (after money, which one could argue is also related to work) source of very/somewhat significant stress in America” [1]. The prevalence of stress also seems to have

escalated over time – the portion of workers reporting high levels of stress at work rose from 55% to 75% between 1983 and 1996 [3]. Stress has even been dubbed the “Health Epidemic of the 21st Century” by the World Health Organization (WHO). This prevalence of stress also is a large burden to the economy. The WHO also estimates that stress costs American businesses \$300 billion dollars per year. Clearly, there is a large benefit to addressing both the prevalence and management of stress. Yet the scientific literature has largely focused on the negative aspects of stress.

A small but growing area of scientific literature offers some hope by providing evidence that not all consequences of stress are negative, indicating that we need to look at the concept of stress with a more nuanced framework. Cardon & Patel [4] indicate that, controlling for past income and prior health, self-employed people experience greater stress than employees, but stress positively impacts income and self-employment buffers the negative effect of stress on personal health. These relationships are moderated by positive affect (PA), where PA accentuates the positive effect of stress on personal income and mitigates the

negative effect of stress on physical health. In *The Pursuit of Happiness in the U.S* [5], stress is negatively related to subjective well-being (SWB) in the lower

ends of the income distribution, but related to increase SWB in the higher ends of the income distribution. This may seem surprising that stress can be a positive factor in peoples' evaluation of their lives, but the distinction between two types of stress, *eustress* and *distress*, helps clarify why the general concept of "stress" can be misleading. Having a controlled level of stress is a way for most individuals to achieve objectives and targets is *eustress*. Certain situations can seem overwhelming for individuals and diminish performances and leads to burnout are *distress*. O'Sullivan [6] revealed a significant positive correlation between eustress and life satisfaction. Simmons & Nelson [7] find that hope, used as a proxy for eustress along with positive affect and meaningfulness had a significant and positive relationship with the perception of health in this sample of hospital nurses.

So what determines if a situation is viewed as a source of eustress or distress? Stressors (or demands in this case) are positively associated with worker engagement when they are viewed as challenges, but negatively associated when they are viewed as hindrances [8]. It seems that with the right work environment, eustress can be fostered if stressors are framed as challenges rather than hindrances. According to Gavin & Mason [3], job stress is felt when the demands of the work exceed the workers' belief in their capacity to cope. On the other side of the spectrum, boredom arises when a lack of challenge is felt. Weighing employee skills on one side and difficulty of the task on the other side, positive psychologists have come up with the concept of 'flow', which is a productive equilibrium where skills and challenge are balanced. This often leads to an agreeable, intense state of mind, completely empty of stress, where notions of time or hunger can even disappear for a period of time. This balance is subtle, however, and can be somewhat

hard to find. If individuals view the demands as something they do not have autonomy over (too much pressure either internally or externally), the effect on workplace well-being is negative – lower levels of engagement, less positive affect [9]. Ultimately, these findings from the literature suggest that there are factors to consider when attempting to foster eustress and minimize distress in the workplace; the key resides in finding the balance that balances direction from management, demands/challenges, and autonomy.

As mentioned before, another benefit of eustress is promoting higher levels of SWB, which is beneficial in buffering the negative effects of distress. But there are additional benefits of higher SWB for worker performance. According to Verhaeghe et al. [10], if SWB is lowered, then the negative effects of distress are amplified. The authors show that when management changes psychological well-being (conceptually and empirically related to SWB), nurses experienced higher levels of distress and absence from work regardless of if the change in management was viewed as a challenge or a hindrance. The flip side of this finding is, when high levels of SWB are maintained, distress and the negative associated effects can be avoided. There are also other benefits of higher levels of SWB in the workplace. The World Happiness Report 2013 [11] outlines the objective benefits of happiness for health, productivity, organizational behavior, and pro-social behavior. Oswald et al. [12] Found positive effects of happiness on productivity in the lab and in a natural experiment.

Stress is part of peoples' lives, and particularly so at work. Far from being *inherently* just bad, it seems that the context in which the stressors take place matter as much as the stressors themselves for individuals. Thus, it seems that a deeper understanding of how to frame stressors and challenges that promote eustress could possibly have large productivity and well-being benefits. The benefits of creating a workplace based around eustress can be twofold and cyclical—eustress positively affects health, productivity

and also increases SWB, and increased SWB can buffer workers from the negative effects of distress. But how to frame stressors and challenges is context dependent, and the current state of the literature only focuses on a small number of occupations. This article is a call for more reflection on how to design the modern workplace with eustress at the forefront of the minds of social scientists, managers and CEOs.

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